

Testimony on HB 4610

By

Dave Smethurst

Good Morning,

My name is Dave Smethurst. I'm from Gaylord. I am a member of the Pigeon River Country State Forest Advisory Council. In fact, I am the only remaining charter member of that Council which is charged with providing citizen review of DNR management of the State Forest. It also has a legislative mandate to review oil and gas activity. I have served as the Chair of the Council in the past. Currently, I Chair of the Horseback Committee of the Advisory Council. I also served on the Recreation Sub Committee, which included horseback use in the PRC, during a review of the Concept of Management for the Forest initiated by Director Humphries. I must make clear I am testifying as an individual, and not on behalf of the Advisory Council. However, I do bring a historical perspective that may be helpful.

Horseback activity in the PRC has increased in the past 30 years. Perceived user conflicts and some site specific environmental degradation from horseback use led to the creation of the Horseback Committee by the Advisory Council sometime ago. Recommendations were made to address those concerns and most were adopted by the DNR. Some were not, with sound rationale from the DNR for not accepting those recommendations. Others were not adopted due to the lack of resources in the Department.

During the review of the Concept of Management, the Recreation Sub Committee recommended that horseback use be allowed to continue in much the same fashion, and, by implication, continue to be monitored and adjusted as needed. Ultimately, that recommendation was rejected by the DNR and Natural Resources Commission. I believe that was in error. A small number of folks perceived the PRC was, to use their words, "overrun with horses," and the perception was their use of the Forest was impaired by the number of horseback users. There was, and is not, data to support those claims. I keep a journal of sorts. In 2007, I was in the PRC 32 times, from the beginning of trout season to the start of deer season.

I saw 8 horses during that time. None interfered with my use of the Forest. I suspect most of the perceived conflicts were found in the vicinity of the Elk Hill horse camping areas. I simply avoided that area, with more than enough room in the PRC for me to enjoy myself. I shared the Forest. Was the PRC “overrun” with horses? From November to April, there is almost no use by horses. Deer hunters, cross country skiers, rabbit hunters, snowshoers, etc., reported no user conflicts. In May and June, there is more horseback use, but few conflicts. More horseback campers came in July and August. One opponent to horses said, “They even advertised out of State and people came here on vacation.” The real crunch with horses comes is late September and October where the PRC is beautiful and interesting with bugling elk. Those months also draw the most hunters with archery deer season, bear season and an elk season. Really, the issue is about those two months.

In my visits to the Pigeon River Country over the years, I visit with folks regularly. The horsemen and women I visit are uniformly nice people. They came to the area for the same reason as I did – they just came on the back of a horse. They follow the rules, love the land, peace, quiet and appreciate the beauty. I think they have been maligned by those who perceive conflicts. The attributes of a few “outlaws” were transferred to all horse people. That is not accurate or fair. I recall several times, when I parked in the areas designated for horseback camping when bird hunting. In each case, the horseback folks asked where I was going to hunt and said, “We’ll go the opposite direction.” Many, if not the majority of horse campers I met included several generations – sometimes three generations. One of my concerns is the youngest generation. I got hooked on the outdoors by my Dad and Grandfather with a fishing pole. Fewer young people are hunting and fishing today. They are playing computer games indoors. Read a book called “The Last Child in the Woods” for more about this phenomenon. I want all the young people possible to learn about and love the outdoors. If that means, it’s sitting behind Grandpa and Grandma on the back of a horse – that’s great.

To be fair, there were problems with horseback use in the Pigeon. At least once, and probably a few times more that weren’t witnessed, “cowboys” chased elk like cattle in the movies. There were anecdotal

conflicts with hunters. Some areas were used, and abused by horses. Some of these abuses could have been addressed by the DNR, but the resources to do the work weren't present or at least a priority wasn't assigned.

Personally, I think the new horseback rules for the Pigeon are wrong. Real solutions could have been developed. Those opposed to horseback use didn't propose solutions – they were just against horses in the PRC. There were unforeseen consequences, as seen here today, by the NRC action. I was taught by my Dad to be part of a solution, not a continuing part of a problem. My acquaintances in the horse community have urged me to come here and testify. I suspect they would say “amen” to most of what I have said. They won't like the next paragraph, but I hope will like the last.

I do not support this proposed bill, HB4610. This bill will not solve the problem. It will, in fact, create new ones. User conflicts will not go away with this bill, they will intensify. Now the “other side” will get organized. In the conservation community, there is long standing opposition to legislative management of our natural resources. You'll be on the hot seat from the other side of the debate. It also sets a precedent for other groups of users to come to the legislature with their complaints. We've have too many more important things going on in Michigan for you to work on.

When the new rules were approved, in 2007, one of the reasons given was concern about Pittman-Robertson and Dingell-Johnson monies being threatened by horseback use in the Pigeon. As you know, this money comes from taxes willingly paid by outdoors folks on the equipment and gear they buy. Now, in a recent letter, the Fish and Wildlife Service, after being asked to review this proposed legislation by the DNR, which was entirely appropriate, have said that, indeed federal money, to the tune of \$25 million, is jeopardized and not only that, Michigan may have to pay penalties. This is simply not the time for the Legislature to put a stream of Federal funding at risk and to allow money from taxes paid by Michigan citizens go to other States. We can't afford that. That alone will create a whole

new set of user conflicts and you'll be blamed. These are predictable consequences of this legislation.

So – what to do? Can a solution be found? I, and others, believe so. One misconception is that “multiple use” means everybody can do anything on the same piece of State Forest at the same time. That is not what “multiple use” means and it is a recipe for a real mess. The answers have a foundation in a recommendation made by the Advisory Council years ago. Let's move some horseback use to the east, onto another State Forest, without the real or imagined user conflicts being so prominent. To the east is the Mackinaw State Forest in Montmorency County. The rolling land appears much the same. There are elk to view and to listen to as they bugle in the fall. I think most of the land is tax reverted, not purchased with PR dollars. By the way, this just isn't me talking, but my testimony came as a result of several folks who care and are knowledgeable. Montmorency County is historically one of the more economically challenged counties in the State. High unemployment is the rule, not a recent development. Much of the income, in fact the yearly profits, by the many small mom and pop businesses have come from deer season. They have been hard hit by the impact of bovine tuberculosis. Over the weekend, I spoke with several small business owners and they would welcome the State and horseback users in developing a system of camps and trails to make Montmorency County a destination for outdoor recreation on the back of a horse. This could be a win for the State, a win for horseback riders and a win for the PRC. To be sure, there will be a handful of archers and bird hunters who don't want to share. But we could put a large chunk of land off limits to all horseback use, and still have lots of land left for horse camping and riding. This committee should urge the DNR to convene a planning group for that effort. Heaven knows, Montmorency County needs a direct economic stimulus and there might even be federal stimulus dollars to make it happen. Perhaps even Trust Fund money could be used. In addition, I suggest the Committee do a real serious review of the whole federal funding issue. I urge you to go this route, and not the route of the pending legislation. Remember, this legislation has predictable consequences that just aren't good for Michigan.

As a part of that planning effort, I do think there should be the opportunity to ride horses in the PRC. I think the large group camping area at Elk Hill should be looked at and perhaps moved east. I think that several of the closed small horse camp area should be reopened with a reservation system. I think riding should be allowed in all but the most sensitive areas. I think, if there is a conflict during the fall elk season, horseback riding could be banned for that short period of time by "time zoning" which is a common tool is resource management when there is a user conflict or impact on wildlife.

Thank your time.

